

Symphonie fantastique

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Sarah Gibson *warp & weft*

Now based in greater Los Angeles, Sarah Gibson has emerged as a major voice in the exploration of the creative process, especially from the female perspective. As a pianist, she remains active in performing with chamber ensembles and orchestras on both sides of the Atlantic. Her compositions are frequently inspired by the visual arts. *warp and weft* is a 14-minute orchestral movement catalyzed by the work of artist Miriam Schapiro. Gibson has written,

The form and content of *warp & weft* is particularly inspired by the art of weaving. I visualized a loom and the act of weaving while composing, where the weft (horizontal axis of the loom) is represented by sections dedicated to gradually developing melodies, and the warp (vertical axis of the loom) depicts the sections identified by strong vertical chords. Throughout the piece, I imagine Schapiro's studio, full of color, various materials and ideas, swirling around in a fantastical way as she moves from medium to medium celebrating the history and artistic viewpoints of women past, present and future.

Sergei Rachmaninoff *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Op. 43

Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* is a 20th-century work, but its theme is one of the Classical era's best known: Paganini's 24 Violin Caprice. Rachmaninoff's variations celebrate virtuoso pianism and the lush sound of full orchestra. The irresistible 18th variation alone is worth the price of admission. Though it is not a piano concerto by name, this beloved piece has become as popular as any Rachmaninoff work and remains a favorite of pianists and audiences alike.

Hector Berlioz *Symphonie fantastique*, Op. 14

Obsessive love underlies Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*. Its principal theme, symbolizing the beloved, recurs in each movement. Berlioz called it *idée fixe*, or 'fixed idea.' His expansion of this symphony to five movements is a direct outgrowth of Beethoven's five-movement "Pastoral" Symphony, which also embraced extramusical content. Beethoven's inspiration was the pastoral beauty of the countryside. Berlioz was influenced by Thomas DeQuincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* and by his own unrequited love for an Irish actress. Berlioz transforms the *idée fixe* in the course of each movement, as opium induces the hero to hallucinate. Those hallucinations distort the *idée fixe* in the thrilling "March to the Scaffold." In the finale, the "Witches' Sabbath," Berlioz introduces the medieval chant "*Dies irae*." Rachmaninoff and other later composers would follow his example, using the same chant in other musical works — including this program's *Rhapsody*.

Sarah Gibson: *warp & weft*

Sarah Gibson

Born: May 21, 1986, in Spartanburg, South Carolina

Composed: 2018

World Premiere: First performance January 26, 2019 in Glendale, California. Peter Oundjian conducted the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: These performances will be the first

Duration: 14 minutes

Instrumentation: two flutes (both doubling piccolo), two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets (second doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons (second doubling contrabassoon), two horns, two trumpets, timpani, percussion (kick drum, tambourine, 2 log drums, sandpaper blocks, sizzle cymbal, triangle, piccolo woodblock, vibraphone, tubular bells, 4 pitched gongs), piano and strings

Los Angeles-based Sarah Gibson is a vibrant young figure in classical music and the arts. She is active as a pianist and teacher, as well as a composer. Her participation as collaborative pianist with new music chamber ensembles has fostered her interest in the creative process, particularly from a woman's viewpoint. Her composer's note explains *warp & weft's* unusual title – the terms come from the art of weaving – and the piece's connection to a visual artist Gibson cites as a founding artist of the feminist art movement.

Inspired by the trailblazing work of artist Miriam Schapiro, *warp & weft* is a celebration of the creative process and specifically the Schapiro-coined term "femmage." Femmage, or feminist collage, defines any activity practiced by women using traditional women's techniques to achieve their art – collage, *découpage*, and weaving, just to name a few. Schapiro used the term to elevate the significance of women's crafting in the home which was historically denigrated as "decorative" art compared to predominantly male artists whose pieces were classified as "high" art.

The form and content of *warp & weft* is particularly inspired by the art of weaving. I visualized a loom and the act of weaving while composing, where the weft (horizontal axis of the loom) is represented by sections dedicated to gradually developing melodies, and the warp (vertical axis of the loom) depicts the sections identified by strong vertical chords. Throughout the piece, I imagine Schapiro's studio, full of color, various materials and ideas, swirling around in a fantastical way as she moves from medium to medium celebrating the history and artistic viewpoints of women past, present and future.

Many of Gibson's compositions have been inspired by the visual arts. Her mother sewed, and, growing up, Gibson did a lot of arts and crafts. She discovered Schapiro's art on the cover of a box of notecards in a gift shop. That led to an internet search for more of Schapiro's work, some of which included weaving. The layers and textures in Schapiro's work resonated with Gibson, who responded particularly to the musical potential of the weaving terms 'warp' and 'weft.' Her score celebrates the color and heft of full symphony orchestra,

reveling in a panoply of textures and interconnected melodic gestures. Though the piece is for full orchestra, Gibson is judicious in her use of the full resources, often relying on individual instrumental timbres. Only rarely do we hear the full mass of the ensemble. Instead, the focus is on multicolored strands of sound, illustrating the metaphor of Gibson's title.

Sarah Gibson earned degrees in both piano performance and composition from Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music and the University of Southern California. She was the recipient of a Copland House Residency, and has written on commission for the Tanglewood Music Center, Aspen Summer Music Festival, Seattle Symphony, the Toulmin Foundation and the League of American Orchestras. *warp & weft* was commissioned by the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra's Sound Investment commissioning program. Gibson currently serves as Assistant Professor of Composition and Theory at Cal State Long Beach, whose new music ensemble she also directs. She is also Assistant Director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Composer Fellowship Program. Gibson co-founded HOCKET, the new music piano duo, and she is a regular artist with Los Angeles' Piano Spheres series.

Sergei Rachmaninoff *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, Op. 43

Sergei Rachmaninoff

Born: 1873 in Oneg, Novgorod District, Russia

Died: March 28, 1943, in Beverly Hills, California

Composed: July to August 1934

World Premiere: November 7, 1934, in Baltimore. The composer was the soloist; Leopold Stokowski conducted The Philadelphia Orchestra

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1955—56 season, conducted by Leon Fleisher with piano soloist Samuel Antek

Duration: 22 minutes

Instrumentation: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (snare drum, bass drum, triangle, cymbals, glockenspiel), harp, solo piano and strings

Niccolò Paganini's greatest musical legacy has been the apparently unstoppable fount of works inspired by his 24th Violin Caprice, drawn from the collection that constitutes a cornerstone of the virtuoso violinist's repertoire. Two nineteenth-century masters, Brahms and Liszt, were caught by the spell of the finale Caprice; each composed a major piano piece based on the sprightly melody. Rachmaninoff was similarly lured in the early 1930s. With the Brahms and Liszt works looming as models, he wrote his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* during summer 1934, while vacationing with his family in Lucerne, Switzerland. The piece was an immediate success at its premiere and has been an audience favorite ever since.

The *Rhapsody* is related conceptually to his popular piano concerti but is actually an extended set of variations

on Paganini's theme. Broadly speaking, it divides into three principal sections, with the central D-flat major variation (No. XVIII in the score) functioning as the center of the "slow movement." That famous theme, which is an inversion of Paganini's, constitutes the emotional crux of the piece, and is the melody echoing in listeners' ears as they leave the concert hall.

Rachmaninoff also incorporated the Gregorian chant "Dies Irae" in three of the variations, including the finale. He was fascinated with the ancient melody, also using it in his symphonic poem *The Isle of the Dead*, Op. 29 (1909) and choral symphony *The Bells*, Op. 35 (1913); he would return to the medieval theme for his final orchestral work, the *Symphonic Dances* (1940).

Rachmaninoff's original title for this extraordinarily popular composition was "Symphonic Variations." As work progressed on the piece, the title was altered to "Fantasia for Piano and Orchestra in Form of Variations." That Rachmaninoff eventually settled on "Rhapsody" as the key word in the work's title tells us something about the direction the music took, and his perception of variation form.

Paganini's 24th Caprice has proven to be among the most durable works in literature. In addition to the romantics Schumann, Brahms and Liszt, many composers have been drawn to this sprightly tune. Also in the mid-twentieth century, Boris Blacher, Alfredo Casella, Luigi Dallapiccola and Witold Lutoslawski composed works based on the Paganini. George Rochberg's more recent *Caprice Variations* (1973) stands as another major achievement engendered by Paganini's theme.

Rachmaninoff surely knew that his composition risked being compared unfavorably with earlier works, especially those by Brahms and Liszt. The pressure on him was heightened by the lack of critical and popular acclaim for his Third and Fourth Piano Concerti (1909 and 1926, respectively). Neither concerto had yet come near achieving the popularity of the first two piano concerti, and Rachmaninoff's confidence in his creative ability was severely shaken.

He composed the *Rhapsody* during summer 1934, while vacationing with his family in their new villa outside Lucerne. Writing to his friend Vladimir Vilshau, he noted:

It is a very long piece, about 20-25 minutes. That is the size of a piano concerto. . . I am going to try it out in New York and London, so that I can make the necessary corrections. The composition is very difficult, and I should start practicing it, but with every year I become more and more lazy about this finger work. I try to shirk practicing by playing something old, something that already sits firmly in my fingers.

Evidently, he regained his technique satisfactorily, for the premiere in November 1934 was a great success. It has become firmly entrenched in the repertoire, enjoying equal popularity with his Second and Third Piano Concerti.

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Hector Berlioz: *Symphonie fantastique*, Op. 14

Hector Berlioz

Born: December 11, 1803, in La-Côte-Saint-André, France

Died: March 8, 1869, in Paris

Composed: 1830

World Premiere: December 5, 1830, in Paris. François-Antoine Habeneck conducted.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: the 1933—34 season conducted by Rene Pollain

Duration: 49 minutes

Instrumentation: 2 flutes (second doubling piccolo), 2 oboes (second doubling English horn), 2 clarinets (first doubling E-flat clarinet), 4 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 cornets, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, 2 tubas, 2 sets of timpani, percussion (bass drum, snare drum, cymbals, 2 low bells), 2 harps and strings

For Hector Berlioz, Beethoven epitomized the power and expressive potential of the symphony. He was thrilled by Beethoven's expansion of the symphonic concept in the "Pastoral" and "Choral" symphonies. In France, a country where symphonic music took a subservient role to the all-important operatic stage, Berlioz set his unorthodox ambitions on carrying on the Beethovenian spirit. Berlioz's passion for the literary works of Goethe and Shakespeare was to find lifelong expression in his symphonic music. The *Symphonie fantastique*, while not directly based on either Shakespeare or Goethe, has become irrevocably associated with a Shakespearean actress on tour in Berlioz's France.

Harriet Smithson made her Parisian début in 1827 as Juliet and Ophelia in English performances of Shakespeare's plays. She created a sensation and Berlioz, like all of Paris, flocked to the theatre to see her perform. Though he did not understand English well, Berlioz was sufficiently familiar with *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* to project his literary ardor onto the female protagonist of each. He fell headlong in love with the comely Irish actress. Starting in 1828, he wrote to her for almost two years, but she did not respond to even those letters he had taken the trouble to frame in English.

The young composer's romantic passion was undimmed. By February 1830 Berlioz was in such a keyed-up emotional state that he "could scarcely endure — or distinguish between — moral and physical pain," as he wrote to his father. In this agitated, precarious frame of mind, Berlioz began composing the *Symphonie fantastique*. Two months later it was finished, the creative efflorescence of his unrequited love.

As one might expect from such impassioned origins, the symphony is an intensely personal expression. Written on the eve of the 1830 July Revolution, the *Symphonie fantastique* is the quintessential expression of its age. Frankly autobiographical, it bears the subtitle "Episode in the Life of an Artist." The basic premise is that a sensitive young artist, rejected by the woman he loves, has taken a potentially fatal dose of opium in a

suicide attempt. Rather than dispatching him to his destiny, the opium catalyzes a series of hallucinatory dreams reflecting the artist's unstable state. These visions culminate in the nightmare-induced belief that he has murdered his beloved and is being led to the scaffold for execution. Such lurid experiences process themselves in his drugged mind as music, which we hear.

We live in a society where such escapist drug use and suicide are unacceptable social behavior. But opium was not illegal in Berlioz's day; it was widely prescribed as a painkiller and far more readily available than it is today. Indeed, the 1822 publication of Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* created quite a stir, and Goethe himself had contributed to the fashionable status of romantic suicide — especially that inspired by unrequited love — as early as 1774 with *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Berlioz was, one might say, on the cutting edge: unconventional enough to be deemed *risqué* but stopping shy of the offensive.

Musically this adventurous program required considerable adjustments to the traditional four-movement symphonic form. To begin with, Berlioz expanded his symphony to five movements. A precedent had been set with the Beethoven Sixth ("Pastoral") symphony; Berlioz adopted that idea to allow for greater exploration of the hero's different emotional states. Next, anticipating Wagner and to some extent Liszt, he assigned a musical theme to the beloved, calling it *idée fixe*; the term is borrowed from psychology. This theme, introduced in the first movement and varied or transformed in each of the subsequent movements, becomes an integrating component that serves both structural and narrative purposes. As a recurrent melodic idea it makes the symphony a cyclic composition. As an auditory reminder of the program, the *idée fixe* turns the *Symphonie fantastique* into a dramatic work, even though it does not have singers, actors or staging. With this, his first unquestioned masterpiece, Berlioz turned a sharp corner with the romantic symphony and never looked back.

Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* is in both C major and C minor, using that tonal ambiguity to heighten the sense of psychological imbalance. In the first movement our hero first encounters his ideal woman, the beloved, and capitulates to her charms. He starts out in a state of sadness, somewhat meditative, but his newfound obsessive passion wreaks great changes in him — and in the music.

In the next vision (the second movement), we are with our hero at a gala ball where he glimpses the beloved through the crowd of dancing couples. The key changes to F major for the appearance of the beloved; her impact on the artist is clear.

Berlioz was proud of the effect that the Adagio ("Scene in the Country") always had on the public and himself. Two shepherds (English horn and offstage oboe) discuss life in a mournful duet; thunder on the horizon disturbs the meditative atmosphere in an eloquent portent of impending doom.

The concluding two movements of the symphony are among the best-known excerpts in the entire symphonic literature. We see the dreamer marching to his own execution, having been condemned to death for the

murder of his beloved. In the diabolical finale, witches and other ghoulish spectres assemble for a death orgy. Berlioz twists the *idée fixe*, distorting it to a macabre, spectral scherzo idea. Is this his revenge for unrequited love?

The last movement is famous for its incorporation of the medieval *Dies Irae* chant, with ophicleides brought in to reinforce the brass section (in modern orchestras, the ophicleide parts are played by tubas). Berlioz quite rightly thought them ugly; his vulgarization of the chant melody was intentional. It is but one example of innovative orchestration in this remarkable orchestral showcase. The *Symphonie fantastique* was also the first major orchestral work in which harp, English horn and bells were used.